

## **Silent Night Holy Light**

By: Rev. Ridgley Joyner

Scriptures: Matthew 3:13-17; Isaiah 42:1-9

With all the 2020 hype, I've noticed a trend of reflecting back on the 2010 decade—where were you, what you accomplished, what you didn't accomplish, what happened in our world.

This morning I'm going to invite you to recall another decade that you might remember as clear as yesterday, or it make take some work:

Do you remember the sixties?

Where were you?

What were you doing?

Or maybe if you weren't alive do you recall things that characterized the 60s?

There was A LOT happening in this decade

The Sixties were dominated by the Vietnam War, Civil Rights Protests, we saw the assassinations of US President John F Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Cuban Missile Crisis, the first man is landed on the moon.

I'm kind of a child of the 60s, as my company of choice seems to be my father's friends here in Philly. I grew up in with them, hearing about all their memories of what Philly and their lives looked like. Over the holiday, I was eyeing a picture frame my dad had from his young adult days in NE Philly—young men arms wrapped around one another cutoff jean shorts, unkept beards, long hair, aviator sunglasses and tight fitted Kelly green eagles tshirts with the sleeves cut off. One of my favorites was a picture of his friend's band "half step" playing in Fairmont park. They loved to play covers of some of the best rock and roll out there—and still perform at local digs! I grew up hearing these covers on a rocking chair on the porch at Avalon when I was 6. I danced like a little flower child to their beatles songs in the basement as we rang in 2010, and I smiled sweetly while they sang to me Tom Petty this summer at their infamous Woodstock backyard BBQ in 2019.

I grew up attending these "gigs" as they called them and when I got my first car, I played their record cassette tapes learning every word to the greatest hits of Neil Young, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, you name it. Because of this, I often discover even today that my dad's friend chuck did NOT write "mustang sally" "why get up" and many more classic rock songs.

The gift these men and their band gave me was a LOVE for the music from the decade of the 60s. Simon and Garfunkel ranking as one of the top bands on my list.

One of my favorite songs of theirs was written in 1966, called "The 7 o'clock News" and while it is deemed a classic rock song—it has such significance in 2020. When I listen to it, chills go to my bones to see how such a small thing they did still makes an impact today. The band sang a

cover of the hymn silent night over a newscasting of the 7 o'clock news from August 3, 1966 and that night was anything but silent.

If you haven't heard of this song, you're in luck. We are going to take the next 2 minutes to listen to it—

[ Click Here to Listen: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgYFXCUEL4Y> ]

What's scariest about this song is that it was a day in the life in the 60s, it's not like they chose the worst of the news and cut and pasted them together. This was a daily newscast. But why did they choose silent night of all hymns?

It made me think of the week after Christmas when a group of Jewish people gathered in their rabbi's home celebrating a night of Hanukah when they were so abruptly interrupted with an intolerant hate crime. Silent night?

It made me think of the week of Christmas when areas in Australia almost as large as our entire country were on fire, destroying wildlife, over 2,000 homes with no end in sight. Silent night?

It made me think of this week, the week of epiphany when countless earthquakes hit Puerto Rico after an already devastating hurricane—of our loved ones over there, knowing their fear of vulnerability in losing the very thing that gives protection & stability- their homes, their city.

It made me think the week of Christmas and the of the news of the death of a general in Iran and the sudden fear of security that it brought the civilians in the country. And the downed airplane this week taking people from this world much too soon. And the fears of us, of war or peace—the uncertainty of the future—of our loved ones on military deployments in the middle east. Silent night?

Why on earth did they choose *that* hymn? Why *wouldn't* they choose this hymn.

On the way to SC last week, I heard a cover of this song where they used a newscast from 2019 with the hymn silent night and it struck me. Why wouldn't they choose this hymn!

This artistic act reminds us that what is happening in the church and what is happening in the world must be reconciled. Christ was not born in a void.

Jesus was born not into a sweet world, full of peace, void of pain stress and discord. Jesus came precisely because our world is the opposite of that. THAT is why God's people were so desperate for a savior—for hope in what *they* saw was a hopeless world!

In the church we have a bad habit of “hallmark”-ing the Christmas story—making it sweet and comforting they hymns are almost lullabies. Because that is what we seek when we live in a chaotic world—we want to come to church and feel loved and claimed and good. We want to be in a holy space that provides us security.

And in a split small moment all was calm there in that space—Jesus did sleep in heavenly peace. In that cozy manger, Jesus was claimed loved and safe. Angels were singing hallelujah and a holy light shone for all to see.

The very thing that made the birth of Christ comforting was that God came in the flesh to break through the pain of the world, to feel it and to defeat it. The world Christ came into wasn't safe or calm or cozy. Bethlehem was no Thomas Kincaid painting and the moment his birth was made known, he was a threat to a king who feared his power would be usurped by a *baby*.

We end Christmas with this “silent night” image but epiphany reminds us that while it was a holy night—God's holy light led the wise men to Jesus, that same light led mary joseph and Jesus away from Bethlehem as they fled to Egypt for his very life—he himself the SON of God was a refugee born to an unwed teenage mother.

JC was born into a chaotic world and Simon and Garfunkel's song is so meaningful because it reminds us that God's presence in the world doesn't mean we will all be living a sweet blessed life forgiven of our sins.

It means that the world will continue to be chaotic—but God breaks in and sends his son to be in the thick of it.

We too experience the chaos of the world—just this week we were inundated with more news of violence, natural disaster, recurring sting of grief. And we so badly want to come to church and remember the silent night, holy night atmosphere. The sweetness and goodness of God's mercy- to hear that we are loved and claimed. But God's salvation doesn't stop there—because Christ is born to us in a world of the 7 o'clock news—and God's light shines, sending us to live between the manger and the 7oclock news.

Our scripture today references the baptism of JC—another “sweet” and “holy” act

This baptism marks the beginning of his ministry on earth among us, not the end—it was a moment to remember and affirm that he is claimed in his baptism and also that his baptism is the very thing that sends him on his way.

For us, baptism often looks like an end—something we make sure we have done—much like confirmation. But for us too our baptism is a time that we affirm together God's promises for someone and our role in baptism too. It is what sends us forth into a chaotic world to be and shine God's light in the darkness. In our baptism God who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people

upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: Says to us--

[Isaiah 42:6-9]

42:6 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations,

42:7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

42:8 I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

42:9 See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;

These past three weeks, we have been reminded that God loves us so much that he came to be among us in the flesh- to feel our pain, insecurities, vulnerabilities, our fears but also to show us the way to share God's light in the world.

Christ goes before us and God's claiming spirit goes with us on our way.

To engage the world and all the heartache it entails, not avoid it. To enact the kingdom of God through word and deed—to reflect God's magnificent light to the world.

We have work to do friends, and here in this space, we gather, we worship, we are reminded who we are and whose we are—and that very thing sends us OUT these doors, not to simply finish to do lists, attend meetings and pay the bills.

But to seek God in the midst of it all, to share god in the midst of it all, to make space for god's light in the midst of it all.

To remember our baptism, to affirm gods claim on our life—and to go from this place knowing that in this crazy world full of great joy hope love and peace, this crazy world full of heartbreak and vulnerability grief and violence. This crazy world is where God dwells—it is where God broke in on a silent night, there will be a bright star leading us home. And it's a holy holy light.

**AMEN.**